

Make A Difference Through Prayer
April 29, 2018

I want to tell you four stories this morning. They have something in common about prayer.

In 1996 Jackie and Novella McClung were serving at the Stewart Baptist Center in Atlanta, Georgia. They were a missionary couple serving with our North American Mission Board. On Monday afternoons they worked with a group of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade boys from the neighborhood. They called this group their Monday Boys.

They were wild, disruptive, rude, and uncontrollable. They argued with each other, didn't listen to the Bible stories, put glue in each other's hair, and similar misbehavior.

One particular Monday the boys came in and played basketball with no arguments or fights. After the game they sat in their chairs and followed directions for crafts. They listened intently to the Bible story and even answered questions about it.

That night, the McClungs, wondering what had made the difference, noticed that Novella's name was on the national missionary prayer list for that date. That meant that ten's of thousands of Christians had been praying for her during the day.

The next week the Monday boys were back to normal. But Novella said, "We weren't discouraged. God had shown us who they could be, and we knew with His help we could make a difference in their lives."

The second story took place when I was about 20 years old. A man came to church one Sunday evening who had been a member of the church since I was a small boy, but I had not seen him for some years. He said his wife lay ill in the hospital and asked us to pray for her. We did pray for her that night.

The next Sunday the pastor shared that she took a decided turn for the better the previous Sunday evening. It occurred at the very time we were praying for her.

The third story is about the teenaged brother of one of the teens in our church. He had been jumped by a group of boys and badly beaten up. He developed a brain tumor from his injuries. The doctors gave him about 18 months to live. Our church started praying. A year later the doctors took X-rays and found the tumor had disappeared without a trace. They were mystified, but we were not. We rejoiced and praised God.

The last story involved a relative of mine. She and another woman in her church both suffered from chronic illnesses. There were weeks that they could not function at all for the pain. A small group of women in their church started getting together with them once a week to pray for them. At least the goal was to get together once a week. They were not able to gather every week. And it turned out that the weeks they prayed together there was marked improvement in the conditions of both women. The weeks they did not pray the two women suffered as usual.

The point of these stories, as I hope you can see, is that prayer can make a difference.

But we must be careful how we view prayer. We sometimes hear a story like these and say, "Prayer works." But that statement is wrong. Prayer does not work. At least it does not work mechanically or magically. The truth is, there is no power in prayer. Prayers have no power to accomplish anything on their own. There is no prayer that will guarantee a yes from God.

It is wrong to say that prayer works to always get what is requested.

There is no guarantee that if you get a certain number of people all praying for the same thing, that they will get what they ask for. Even if they pray all night, even if they pray standing, or flat out on the floor, even if they include cutting, shouting, and fasting. Prayer does not work in that way. It is wrong to say that prayer works to always get what is requested.

It is wrong to say that prayer works as if it controlled God.

No amount of prayer or mode of prayer forces God to do anything. Prayer has no power over God. God does not bow to prayer. God is always free to say yes or no to our requests. Prayer does not work in that sense.

It is wrong to say that prayer works as if you convinced God to do what you want.

Prayer does not back God into a corner. It does not force God to do anything He does not want to do. Prayer does not convince God or argue God into doing something He does not want to do. Prayer does not make God change His mind. Prayer does not manipulate or coerce God to fulfill your wishes. Prayer does not work in that way.

So is there any sense in which we can say that prayer works?

Yes. **Prayer works to request things of God.** You can't receive something you don't ask for.

It is evident from the stories I told and of those in the Bible that God chooses to do some things only in response to our prayers. For example. In the story of Job, his three friends spoke incorrectly about God. God told them so and said they needed to offer a sin sacrifice. God then said that Job would pray for them, with the implication being that if Job did not pray for them, God would not forgive them.

So it is in our lives. **God chooses to act because you pray, in ways He would not if you do not pray.** Some things God chooses to do ONLY in response to our prayers. Your asking in prayer may be what God is waiting for in order to do what both you and He want done.

God wants us to ask Him for good things. But just because you ask does not mean you will get what you ask for. God has free will. God is free to say yes, or no, or not give an answer at all, or delay an answer, or give a qualified answer, one that depends on our obedience. God is free to answer as He sees fit.

So how does God choose to what requests to say yes?

1. My prayer must humbly submit to God's will.

God has a purpose in mind for the universe and a plan to bring it to pass. Look at Ephesians 1.11 with me. This is in the context of blessings we have as Christians.

Ephesians 1:11 (NIV) In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will...

So why does God say yes to some of your prayers and not others? Because some conform to His will and others do not.

God created the earth for His own reasons. God has his own purpose and plans for the universe. That includes us. We were created for God's purposes and plans. God will not relinquish His plans to accommodate our prayers. So if you want more yeses to your prayers, ask for things within His will.

We see Jesus praying humble submission to God's will in Luke 22. This is how Jesus concluded several hours of prayer about the cross.

Luke 22:42 (NIV) "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

It was God's will that Jesus die on the cross. So He had to refuse Jesus' request. Submit your requests to God, but with the condition that they fit within God's will.

2. The motivation behind my request must be God's glory.

God created us in order to reveal and magnify His glory. The universe is all about Him. We see this as the reason He does what He does.

Ephesians 1:11-12 (NIV) In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

God is the central focus of His universe. He created for His glory. He made us for His glory. Our salvation is for His glory. Everything in His will is for His glory. My prayers must seek His glory. And often my prayers are just for me, for self-serving reasons. No wonder God says no.

3. We must pray in faith.

God is looking for faith from us. And God is looking to increase our faith in Him. When we pray, we must pray our faith in Him. James writes of asking God for wisdom.

James 1:6 (NIV) But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt,...

Believe what? Believe God. God is looking for faith from us. Faith is choosing to believe in God, believe in his power, believe in his plans, believe his promises. Your prayers should reflect your faith in God.

God is all powerful. Believe it and pray it. God is all knowing. Believe it and pray it. God has a plan. Believe it and pray it. God has a will for you. Believe it and pray it.

So why do we not pray more? Prayer is a direct line to God. There is nothing he cannot do. He can move President Trump or President Putin to fulfill His will.

So why do we not pray more? Let me suggest several reasons. One of them may hit home with you.

- Maybe you don't believe that prayer makes a difference.

The stories today say otherwise. My personal experience says otherwise. The revelation from God, the Bible, says otherwise. Prayer does make a difference. Prayer connects us to the creator of the universe. Prayer God says yes to changes us and can change our world.

- Maybe you don't believe that YOUR prayer makes a difference.

You might think that my prayers carry more weight than your prayers. That's not true. There is nothing in the Bible that even hints that who is praying matters... except that the prayers of Christians matter more. We are adopted into God's own family, so of course our prayers matter most to God. But among Christians no one Christian's prayer carries more weight than another's. What carries weight is seeking God's will and glory and living in obedience to Jesus.

If you are a Christian, seeking to live a holy, godly life with Jesus, your prayers make as much difference as any of the apostles or anyone else. God wants your faith to grow and so is eager to say yes to the things He wants you asking for.

- Maybe you care more about serving your own purposes than God's purposes.

Isn't it those things that occupy your time all week? You are too busy pursuing worldly things to pray for heavenly things?

So are you getting yeses to your prayers? Are you praying for the things God wants to say yes to? Put your life into the hands of Jesus today.